

Hannibal Barca

By Vickie Chao

Back in the 3rd century B.C., the Roman Republic was expanding at an alarming rate. So was the Carthaginian Empire (or Carthage for short) on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. As the two regional powerhouses rushed to build up their presence, a conflict was bound to happen. The first showdown between the Romans and the Carthaginians, called the First Punic War, broke out in 264 B.C. and lasted for 23 years. In the end, the Carthaginians lost. They ceded control over Sicily Island to the Roman Republic and paid it a substantial amount of indemnity.

Five years after the conclusion of the First Punic War, a forceful Carthaginian general by the name of Hamilcar Barca decided to push his country's territory beyond the confines of North Africa. To make up for the loss of Sicily Island, he wanted to develop a military base in Hispania. Originally, he planned to take only his armies with him. But at the last moment, he took his eldest son, Hannibal Barca, too. Why did he change his mind? According to legend, when Hannibal saw Hamilcar making a sacrifice to the gods right before leaving for Hispania, he asked to join the mission. Hamilcar agreed, but under one condition. He wanted the little boy to swear that he would make the Roman Republic his enemy for life. Hannibal, who was only about nine years old at the time, took the oath and never broke it.



Hamilcar, by all accounts, was a great general. Under his leadership, the Carthaginians quickly gained footholds in Hispania. During his nine-year stay there, he fought numerous battles and kept pushing his troops northward. After he got killed in combat, his son-in-law, Hasdrubal, became the new military chief. He wanted peace and even signed a treaty with the Romans. Both sides agreed to draw a line along the Ebro River, with the Carthaginians holding most of the regions south of it and the Romans north. For the next seven years or so, the two archenemies tolerated each other, more or less. This delicate balance finally tilted after a Celt assassinated Hasdrubal in 221 B.C. Upon Hasdrubal's untimely death, the Carthaginian armies in Hispania hailed Hannibal as their commander. This young military chief decided to provoke the Romans. He knew that Saguntum, an independent city-state on his side of the Ebro River, had a very good relationship with the Roman Republic. He wanted to use that to his advantage. In 219 B.C., he launched a series of attacks against Saguntum and barricaded it for nearly eight months. During the siege and the looting afterwards, the Roman Republic protested fiercely. It sent an envoy to see Hannibal. It also sent an ambassador to Carthage, demanding the Carthaginian government to hand Hannibal over. When both meetings went nowhere, the Romans declared war in 218 B.C. That war was called the Second Punic War.

After the onset of the war, Hannibal showed no intention of fighting the Romans in Hispania. He wanted to fight them on their turf -- Italy. So in the spring of 218 B.C., he took nearly 50,000 soldiers and several war elephants with him and left for Italy. To surprise the Romans from a place where they expected it the least, Hannibal did the unthinkable. He crossed the Alps, the highest mountain range in Europe! The march was extremely difficult. Before even getting to the Alps, Hannibal had to battle against many hostile tribes along the way. When he finally reached the foot of the Alps, it was already late autumn. Winter was fast approaching. Eager to take down the Roman Republic as soon as possible, Hannibal urged his men to keep going. The crossing turned out to be a big disaster. Many of his soldiers died fighting the Goths who resented intruders. Many more died because of the harsh weather. After trekking for nearly two weeks, Hannibal finally managed to take his force down the Alps. The entire journey took a big toll on the battalions. By the time they reached the ground, Hannibal had lost nearly half of his men and most of his elephants.

Shortly after invading Italy, Hannibal scored a major victory against the Romans. In the so-called Battle of Ticinus in November 218 B.C., Hannibal defeated and severely wounded a Roman general named Scipio. The triumph gave the Carthaginians a boost in confidence. It also won them support from some of the Roman Republic's allies. The Romans' response to the loss was to send in more soldiers. But since they were not nearly as competent in fighting as Hannibal's men were, they were doomed to fail. In December 218 B.C., Hannibal won the Battle of the Trebia River. Then in March 217 B.C., he won the Battle of Lake Trasimene.

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Despite the repeated defeats, the Roman Republic stuck to its game plan. Once again, it called for more troops (80,000 this time), hoping that sheer volume alone would be enough to stop Hannibal's advance for good. It was wrong! Hannibal understood very well how the Romans fought. He knew that the Romans liked to march forward. He would let them do that by pretending to withdraw. In the meantime, he would send a portion of his troops to spread out and encircle the enemy. Once the trap was set, the onslaught could begin. On August 2, 216 B.C., the two sides met in Cannae. Just as Hannibal had predicted, the Romans marched forward and went straight into his trap! After days of killing, nearly 50,000 Romans died. It was the worst defeat ever in ancient Rome's history!

After the Battle of Cannae, the Romans panicked. They finally realized that they had underestimated Hannibal all along. Now, because of their ignorance, this forceful Carthaginian general roamed through Italy. He captured and sacked one city after another, and many of the Roman Republic's alliances began to shift their positions. Terror loomed over the entire nation like a dark cloud. Nobody knew what would happen next. Nobody knew if Rome would be able to withstand Hannibal's assault. Amazingly, in spite of all the uncertainties, the Roman Republic refused to negotiate with Hannibal. Its new strategy was to avoid open conflicts. With only about 50,000 men at his disposal, Hannibal could not possibly attack Rome while holding on to all the cities he just bagged. To make matters worse for this great general, the Carthaginian Empire turned down his request for more reinforcement troops. For the next thirteen years, Hannibal stayed in Italy and continued to harass its residents. During that period, he was unable to induce the Romans to engage in another battle. Thus, he could not repeat his success in Cannae by scoring another great victory.

While Hannibal chose to remain in Italy, the Roman Republic sent Scipio (son of the Roman general Scipio who lost the Battle of Ticinus in 218 B.C.) to capture Hispania. The idea was to intimidate the Carthaginian Empire, forcing it to call Hannibal back. Scipio arrived at Hispania in 210 B.C. and quickly gained ground. By 206 B.C., he had taken over the Carthaginians' hold in Hispania. After a brief return to Italy, Scipio launched another round of attacks against the Carthaginian Empire. This time, the battleground was not in Hispania, but in North Africa. Scipio took perhaps 35,000 men and left for Africa in 204 B.C. Once the force landed, they again made swift progress right away. The Carthaginian government was horrified. It sent a messenger to Hannibal and demanded his return. When Hannibal learned of the invasion, he was torn. On one hand, he resented his fellow countrymen for not giving him the badly needed reinforcement troops several years earlier. On the other hand, he was patriotic and felt duty-bound to defend his nation. In the end, he chose to go back. He arrived at North Africa in 203 B.C. and had a showdown with Scipio the following year. In the fateful Battle of Zama, Scipio stunned Hannibal with his newly improved force and defeated him soundly. After the bloody conflict, the Roman Republic and the Carthaginian Empire made a truce and ended the Second Punic War (218 B.C. - 201 B.C.)

From 201 B.C. to 195 B.C., Hannibal temporarily gave up his military life and became a statesman. He soon proved that his ability to govern was as good as his ability to fight. He carried out numerous reforms, and all those measures made him very popular. Seeing his success, other Carthaginian politicians were jealous. They conveniently forgot that they had refused to help Hannibal all those years ago and accused him now of not taking down the Roman Republic. As the tension escalated, some in the Carthaginian government even suggested turning Hannibal over to the Roman Republic. Saddened by the betrayal, Hannibal packed his bags and left his homeland. He never returned.

After leaving the Carthaginian Empire, Hannibal became a free-agent general. He offered his service to anybody who hated the Romans. For years, he drifted from one country to another, making a career out of fighting the Roman Republic. Needless to say, the Romans hated Hannibal. As they were closing in on him, Hannibal swallowed poison and killed himself. He died possibly in 181 B.C.

Name _____



Date _____

Hannibal Barca

Questions

- _____ 1. Where was Hannibal from originally?
- A. The Alps
 - B. Italy
 - C. Hispania
 - D. North Africa
- _____ 2. Which of the following about Hannibal is correct?
- A. He vowed to fight the Romans since he was nine years old.
 - B. He was a great general, but a horrible politician.
 - C. He started the First Punic War.
 - D. He captured and sacked Rome in 218 B.C.
- _____ 3. Which battle was the Roman Republic's worst defeat ever in history?
- A. The Battle of Ticinus
 - B. The Battle of Cannae
 - C. The Battle of Zama
 - D. The Battle of Lake Trasimene
- _____ 4. For how many years did the Second Punic War last?
- A. 17 years
 - B. 12 years
 - C. 23 years
 - D. 35 years
- _____ 5. Why did Hannibal leave the Carthaginian Empire in 195 B.C.?
- A. Because he was bored
 - B. Because he wanted to take his force to cross the Alps and invade Italy
 - C. Because his fellow countrymen betrayed him
 - D. Because he found a better job elsewhere
- _____ 6. What was the border between the Carthaginian Empire and the Roman Republic in Hispania before 218 B.C.?
- A. Lake Trasimene
 - B. The Ebro River
 - C. The Rhone River
 - D. The Trebia River
- _____ 7. What animals did Hannibal bring for his invasion of Italy?
- A. Lions
 - B. Elephants
 - C. Giraffes
 - D. Rhinoceros

_____ 8. Why did Hannibal go back to North Africa in 203 B.C.?

- A. Because he wanted to recruit more soldiers
B. Because he wanted to run for an election
C. Because he wanted to defend his nation
D. Because he wanted to visit his family

Suppose you were the Roman commander Scipio who was stationed in Ticinus. Your soldiers just told you that they saw elephants coming down from the Alps. Describe your reaction, and formulate a battle plan.

[illegible]

Suppose you could travel back in time and meet Hannibal. What would you say to him in order to convince him to give up violence and his hatred toward the Roman Republic?

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